

Life After CRP - Opportunities for Technical and Financial Assistance for Wildlife Habitat Development, Enhancement and Management

Think Collaboratively

There are many unrecognized opportunities in Montana to coordinate between individual programs and agencies for the improvement of upland game bird habitat on private and state trust land. Large reductions in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage in Montana are looming on the horizon. These collaborative opportunities become increasingly important in balancing wildlife habitat needs in our changing farmland landscape, if wildlife is to continue to flourish. A 2011 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) provides a framework to establish FWP Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program projects with willing lessees on publically accessible school trust lands, as well as on private lands. Other programs may also be utilized to carry out collaborative projects. UGBEP biologists (in Helena HQ, Conrad, Plentywood/Outlook, or Miles City FWP offices) and local FWP biologists can provide assistance with implementing collaborative state trust and private land projects in addition to the organizations described below.

Wildlife habitat improvements on private property usually benefit surrounding lands as excess animals produced on the improved land spread into new territory. Recognizing these public benefits, a variety of agencies provide financial assistance for private land habitat work. The following offers a brief summary of opportunities for financial assistance to help maintain wildlife habitat following CRP in Montana.

Ducks Unlimited (<http://www.ducks.org/montana/>)



Ducks Unlimited (DU) takes a landscape approach to wetland conservation. Since 1937, DU has conserved more than **12 million acres** of waterfowl habitat across North America. While DU works in all 50 states, the organization focuses its efforts and resources on the habitats most beneficial to waterfowl. In Montana, habitat efforts are focused on the Prairie Pothole Region in the north central and north eastern part of the state; recognizing that:

- Between 50 to 90 percent of the potholes in some regions have been lost or severely degraded – a trend that continues today.
- Since 1984, researchers estimate that nearly 194,000 acres of native grasslands have disappeared in the region.

Conservation programs include perpetual protection of native habitats through easements or ownership, restoration of wetlands and grasslands, and stewardship programs.

For more information about DU habitat conservation opportunities in Montana please contact rsanders@ducks.org or phone: 406-492-2002.



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) (<http://www.fwp.mt.gov>)

Through the **Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP)**, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners and state trust land lessees to improve habitat for Montana's native sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse, and mountain grouse, as well as the state's adopted game birds—ring-necked pheasants, Hungarian partridge, and wild turkeys.

Together, you and your FWP wildlife biologist can assess habitat needs and create plans to develop or enhance upland game bird habitat. The UGBEP can reimburse private landowners and state trust land lessees up to 75% of the cost for upland game bird habitat enhancements.

Habitat project types include:

- Shelterbelts or other winter cover
- Food plots
- Permanent vegetative cover or other nesting habitat
- Conservation of high-value habitat components, including development of sustainable grazing systems, conservation easements, and wetland creations or restorations

For more information, contact Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at 406-444-2612 or by email fwpwld@mt.gov.

Pheasants Forever (<http://www.montanapf.org>)

Pheasants Forever (PF) was formed in 1982 as sportsmen saw the need for wildlife habitat restoration and preservation to ensure the future of pheasants and other wildlife. Today, “**The Habitat Organization**” is comprised of more than 125,000 dues paying members of local PF and Quail Forever Chapters. To date:



- More than 5.9 million acres have been conserved;
- \$365 million expended for local habitat and education projects; and
- 144,973 publically accessible acres of habitat acquired and improved by local chapters.

PF chapters are dedicated to the conservation of pheasants, and other wildlife through habitat improvements, public awareness, education and land management policies and programs. Farm Bill biologists assist private landowners and partner with many organizations to develop and implement habitat enhancement projects.

Contact one of the 15 Montana PF chapters (at the URL above) for information and possible assistance with upland game bird habitat development and restoration in your area. Contact PF Habitat Biologist Ryan Storm for more information about PF opportunities in Montana. Email Ryan at rstorm@pheasantsforever.org or phone (618) 351-1234.

USDA – Farm Service Agency Programs (FSA)
(<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/mt>)

Considerations for Future Enrollment in General CRP: Participants interested in reenrolling acreage into CRP may want to discuss land eligibility requirements with their local FSA office before returning CRP acreage into farm production. Maintaining cover on the land as if it were enrolled in CRP is one way to meet the requirement that land must be planted or considered planted to an agricultural commodity.

Continuous CRP: In addition to opportunities to reenroll land in future General CRP signup periods, FSA also offers a variety of Continuous CRP options. Under Continuous CRP, land devoted to certain conservation practices may be enrolled at any time. Offers are not subject to competitive bidding and are automatically accepted provided the land and producer meet certain eligibility requirements. Continuous sign-up contracts are 10 to 15 years in duration. Increased annual rental payments are available for certain practices. In addition, signup incentive payments and practice incentive payments may be available.

Examples of conservation practices that are eligible for continuous CRP enrollment include:

- Pollinator habitat
- Duck nesting habitat
- Riparian buffers
- Wildlife habitat buffers
- Wetland buffers
- Filter strips
- Wetland restoration
- Grass waterways
- Field windbreaks
- Shelterbelts
- Living snow fences
- Contour grass strips
- Constructed Wetlands
- Restoration of Aquaculture Wetlands
- Vegetation to reduce salinity
- Cross wind trap strips
- Shallow water areas for wildlife
- Land within an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated public wellhead area also may be eligible for enrollment on a continuous basis.

A new **Highly Erodible Land Initiative (HELI)** also allows land with an average erosion rate of 20 or more tons per acre each year to be eligible for enrollment under continuous CRP.

Montana also has three **State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)** project areas approved for continuous enrollment in CRP:

- **Montana Prairie Pothole-Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement SAFE** provides expanded habitat for ducks, ring-necked pheasant, Hungarian (gray) partridge, native sharp-tailed grouse and neotropical birds by supplementing existing habitat by seeding herbaceous vegetation in areas of high wetland densities or that are adjacent to semi-permanent wetlands. Land in the following counties may be eligible: Blaine, Cascade, Chouteau, Daniels, Glacier, Hill, Liberty, Phillips, Pondera, Roosevelt, Sheridan, Teton, Toole and Valley.

- **Montana Pheasants Winter Cover Enhancement SAFE** provides blocks of grass or shrub cover for ring-necked pheasant and other upland birds near existing permanent winter cover. Land in the following counties may be eligible: Daniels, Dawson, McCone, Richland, Roosevelt, Sheridan, and Valley.
- **Montana Sagebrush-Grassland Restoration Area SAFE** restores cropland to sagebrush habitat suitable for a variety of wildlife, including sage grouse and other sagebrush obligate birds such as sage sparrow and sage thrasher. Land in the following counties may be eligible: Big Horn, Carbon, Carter, Fallon, Fergus, Garfield, Golden Valley, Musselshell, Petroleum, Powder River, Rosebud, and Treasure.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is available to improve the water quality of the Missouri and Madison River systems by installing filter strips, riparian buffers, native grasses, wetlands and wildlife habitat practices. Land within one mile of the Missouri-Madison river corridor in Montana may be eligible for enrollment. In addition to signing and practice incentive payments, land enrolled under CREP receives an increased annual rental payment.

Under the **Farmable Wetlands Program** producers can enroll up to 40 acres of wetland and buffers per tract of farmed and prior converted wetlands that have been impacted by farming activities. Acres enrolled receive an increased annual rental payment.

Contact the local county FSA office for more information about these programs. A list of every county office and contact information is available using the URL above.

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
[\(<http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov>\)](http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov)



Formed in response to the Dust Bowl of the 1930's, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners for a variety of conservation needs, including wildlife habitat restoration, enhancement and development. The following is a summary of the primary NRCS assistance available. See the Montana NRCS homepage for more detail. Local NRCS Field Offices are the first point of contact for assistance. NRCS program assistance does not require the landowner to open his or land to public hunting access.

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):** Up to 75% cost-share is available for a variety of habitat projects such as nest cover seedings and brood habitat development and enhancement.
- **Conservation Stewardship Program:** Payments are available for implementing "Enhancements" which add habitat value to eligible properties. Maintaining and enhancing perennial cover on expired CRP land is an example.
- **Grassland Reserve Program:** Rental and easement agreements are available for maintaining and managing grassland habitat.
- **Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program:** NRCS partners with other entities to provide long-term easement opportunities for landowners who agree not to subdivide land, sod-bust or destroy sagebrush cover.
- **Wetlands Reserve Program:** Easements and short-term cost-share agreements restore degraded wetland habitat and protect associated uplands.